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Where is Jesus 'at Home'? Hermeneutical Reflections on the Contextual Jesus¹

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Abstract

This article deals with the new meanings contributed to Jesus in new contexts. It questions how Jesus can be brought 'at home' in an African or Asian context. In particular, the methodological aspects of this question are objects of research. First, following a description of the complex relationship between culture-religion and the importance of the southern hemisphere as the center of world Christianity, the inculturation process in the New Testament times is analyzed. Second, the notion of the 'remembered Jesus' is applied to the inculturation process in the New Testament and to the constitutive period of the early church. Third, a threefold criterion to assess contextual Jesus-interpretations is articulated and related to the idea of *double transformation* as main characteristic of an adequate inculturation process. Fourth, the question is asked whether we can speak of an 'unknown, hidden Jesus' in Asia and Africa.

Keywords

Inculturation; contextual Jesus, remembered Jesus, unknown Jesus, double transformation, catholicity

Introduction

During the seventh assembly of the World Council of Churches in Canberra in 1991, one of the literature stalls displayed a book with a title that summed up the

¹ This article contains the main parts of the methodological first chapter of my monograph *The Non-Western Jesus* to be published in Dutch around Easter 2007 and, hopefully, also in English as soon as possible.

discussion at that gathering. The title read *Must God Remain Greek?*² That discussion was primarily instigated by the sensational address of the South Korean theologian Chung Hyun Kyung. In her contribution to the theme of the assembly—"Come Holy Spirit, Renew the Whole Creation"—she handled a number of motifs that arose from her own Korean religious context; namely, that of Buddhism, shamanism and Korean Minjung theology.³

Her input immediately led to stormy discussions about the legitimacy of new, contextual images and concepts. How do these relate to the conceptual framework that was used by the biblical writers, and later by the church fathers? Must God always remain Greek? In this article we will focus that question on the meanings which are presently attached to Jesus in African and Asian theology. How can Jesus be made 'at home' on these continents?⁴

Inculturation in the New Testament

I wish to define a culture as a comprehensive system of meanings, norms and values through which people give form to or make sense of their material existence in a certain time and environment. Both the way in which we think and the way in which we act belong to such a culture. Even as our thinking and action are subject to change, cultures are also subject to change. It is people who make or break a culture. However, collective culture can also have a powerful influence on individuals. Therefore, we can also say that culture leaves its mark on people.

Generally, a person is more a bearer of the culture in which he or she lives than its creator. Yet a person can take a critical stance in relation to his/her own culture. Religion can play a role in this. Religion is not only the ultimate anchorage of, and thus a validation of, a culture, but it is also often a critical factor. Culture and religion, therefore, only rarely display a completely congruent, one-on-one relationship. Religion has often debased itself in service to the powers that be, but has also often obstructed rulers. The role of religion is thus constantly shifting. The history of religions is full of these role changes. Because of these

² R.E. Hood, *Must God Remain Greek? Afro Cultures and God-Talk* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

³ H.K. Chung, "Come Holy Spirit—Renew the Whole Creation" in: M. Kinnamon (ed.), *Signs of the Spirit. Official Report Seventh Assembly Canberra, Australia, 7-20 February 1991* (Geneva/Grand Rapids: World Council of Churches/ Eerdmans, 1991), 37-47.

⁴ K.Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture. A Ghanaian Perspective* (Accra: Asempa, 1990), 9: "Accepting Jesus as 'Our Saviour' always involves making him at home in our spiritual universe and in terms of our religious needs and longings."

changing roles, we opt here for a rather wide, three-part definition of religion. By religion we understand 1) an existentially experienced dependence on a power (understood as a person or not, as the case may be) that transcends visible human existence, which 2) influences thinking and action, and 3) is expressed in shared symbols, rites and myths.

Through the appeal to that which transcends visible human existence, but which—nevertheless—influences thinking and action, religion has something intangible. Rulers cannot control it, but, by the same token, neither can the adherents of the religion itself. That is why critical questions can always be posed that depend on the nature of the relation between religion and culture. These questions do not, however, challenge the cultural matrix of religion. No religion reveals itself except robed in a culture. A specific cultural robe is not, however, a straitjacket. Religion and culture are not riveted together once and for all. Every religion—and, for that matter, every culture—possesses a certain dynamic (or mobility) which makes change possible as the result of internal developments or external events. Cultural clothes can be changed. A religion that has taken its form in a particular culture can also establish itself in other cultures. When this happens, the question of the adequacy of the concepts determined by the old culture in a new cultural situation generally arises immediately. We term this transitional situation *inculturation*. By that we understand the transference of a specific, culturally shaped system of religious concepts to another culture with its own (and different) system of religious concepts. Christians in Africa and Asia are now engaged in this process. Thus, we have the urgency of the question “Must God Remain Greek?”

In his study devoted to this matter, Robert Hood questions whether the Greco-Roman concepts in which the early church articulated the meaning of God must *per se* always remain normative for other cultures in other times. He argues that for believers in the non-Western world these concepts are more of a barrier than an aid to faith. They complicate the transference of faith rather than make it easier.⁵ The desired re-rooting in non-Greco-Roman cultures now demands a certain uprooting from the Greco-Roman culture.

In non-Western theology today, this case for the transference of faith, and with it also for relevance, is one of the most important reasons for arguing for a different system of concepts for proclaiming the gospel. Non-Western theologians often see a form of imperialism in the Western stress on the continuing validity of the terminology that the early church employed. In fact, the critique

⁵ Hood, *Must God Remain Greek?*, 105-120.

of Western theology generally comes down to the observation that Western theology is also contextual and therefore cannot simply be transferred to other contexts and cannot simply be declared universal.

Now that the center of gravity in Christianity has shifted to the southern hemisphere, the issue raised by Hood—which we have just cited—becomes all the more pressing. Based on current demographic trends, it is estimated that within the next twenty years 633 million of the world's total 2.6 billion Christians will live in Africa, 640 million in Latin America and 460 million in Asia. That is considerably more than half of Christendom.⁶ Even if one believes that these estimates are over-optimistic—they are based heavily on estimates of population growth and the growth claims of evangelical and Pentecostal churches, which are hard to verify—they still remain indicative of the shift in the epicenter of world Christianity. In Asia, for instance, this means a doubling in the percentage of Christians, from 3 to 6% over the next twenty years—an increase of several hundred million. In a total population of at least two-and-a-half billion, these Christians will still remain a small minority in the midst of Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim majorities. In such a situation, how are these Christians to maintain a dialogue regarding the central questions of life with those around them? What criteria will a peculiarly Asian theological language and peculiarly Asian theological concepts have to meet? What is the common point of reference with Christians elsewhere? These questions are, of course, also important to pose with regard to African Christianity.

These are the most important questions in what is now often termed the process of inculturation. The most fundamental problem with regard to this process is the fact that profound religious experiences are always linked with time and place, but that in the case of Jesus, they also always transcend this time and place. In the Greco-Roman world, Jesus was never proposed as a purely local hero who was so bound up with his immediate environment that his significance was also limited to his direct vicinity. Had that been the case, his significance would never have been proclaimed in other cultures. That is true now for Africa and Asia. The goal of the present African and Asian inculturation process can never be the creation of a form of Christianity that would be limited to Africa and Asia.

The process by which meaning was—and is—ascribed to Jesus can be traced rather precisely. He made a profound impression on people around him in a concrete, historical situation. A particular significance was assigned to him based on

⁶ Ph. Jenkins, *The Next Christendom. The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1-14 and 79-105, and Idem, "After the Next Christendom," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 28 (2004) 1, 20-22.

this impression. In the case of Jesus, that has always been a significance that transcended particular, individual experience. Such extrapolation has always been characteristic of universal religions. The foundations of such religions always lie in specific experiences that, removed from this first experiential context, also prove to be of great importance for later generations in other circumstances. This importance can only be experienced when later generations also make the experiences of the first witnesses their own as well. Real universality thus never arises from abstraction, but from the potential of linking the unique experiences of others with one's own experience, and—in this way—experiencing their authenticity. To cite the African, Roman Catholic theologian Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, authentic universality is thus always a matter of a particularity which transcends its own boundaries.⁷

Language plays a crucial role in this identification process. Concepts formulated in a language bear the marks of their culture. Apparently, the West was already shaped by Greco-Roman culture to such an extent that it could appropriate these concepts with relative ease. In Africa and Asia, however, it appears that this identification process is encountering serious problems. Many of the Asian and African churches that arose from Western mission efforts have great difficulty with a way of conveying belief that takes the form of recruitment. They seem to be *Fremdkörper* in their own culture, and are unable to succeed in translating Jesus' message into appealing images. In this same regard—in all honesty—it must also be acknowledged that the history of Western missions in Asia has certainly not been a success story.⁸

The Remembered Jesus

Let us return once again to the very first beginnings of the Christian tradition. Everything that we know of Jesus we know from his contemporaries and fellow-countrymen, who were deeply impressed by him and, for that reason, passed on their impressions. The Jesus whom we know from the New Testament is thus the “remembered Jesus”⁹ of his contemporaries and the generations who followed

⁷ F. Eboussi-Boulaga, *Christianisme sans Fétiche. Révélation et Domination* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1981), 114. Eng. trans. *Christianity without Fetiches. An African Critique and Recapture of Christianity* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984).

⁸ S.H. Moffett, “Has Christianity Failed in Asia?”, *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 26 (2005) 2, 199-211.

⁹ J.D.G. Dunn, *Christianity in the Making, Vol. I: Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids-Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2003), 130-132 and 881-893.

them. All of the terms that people in the New Testament applied to what Jesus did—teacher (rabbi), prophet, royal messiah (king of the Jews, anointed, Christ), healer, exorcist, son of God, son of men, high priest, savior, Word (Logos), light of the world, truth, miracle worker, etc.—are religious terms known from the Palestine of his day, and have a Jewish or Greek background. The creative application of existing religious terms to what people remembered of Jesus is thus the foundation for all the New Testament images of him.

Many theologians are quite willing to admit that there are many religious influences from elsewhere that have played a role in the passing down of Jesus' message, but deny the repeatability of such an inculturation process. For them, this was a one-time process under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We cannot subscribe to such a view, because it is, in fact, arbitrary. At the very least, did such a process—and one at least as important—not take place in the formulation of the first dogmas regarding Jesus after the fixing of the New Testament canon at the council of Nicea (325) and Chalcedon (451)? And if one acknowledges the work of the Holy Spirit there, is there any reason, given the continued formation of dogma after Nicea and Chalcedon, to stop with these councils—all the more because they are not immediately seen as the high points in 'spiritual' decision making?¹⁰ After all, Protestants will also point to the Reformation as the fruit of the work of the Holy Spirit. There are also Christians who are convinced of the leading of the Spirit in the life of their church today. We do not see our own cultures and our own times as being Spirit-less. In the final analysis, there is no distinction to be made in principle between our time and that of the first Christians, even though, in a historical perspective, their time was constitutive for our form of Christianity. That said, however, their time, just as ours, is not exempt from the ambivalences that are peculiar to human existence.

It cannot be said of any culture that it is the bearer of the gospel *par excellence*. It must also be said that every culture can also obstruct the conveyance of the gospel. Therefore, the question must always be raised of what has perhaps been lost in the course of time—lost through human limitations and imperfections to which the New Testament writers and church fathers were also subject, for even then it was already the case that *traduire est trahir* (translation is treason).¹¹

¹⁰ A. Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition, Vol. I: From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (451)* (London: Mowbray, (1965) 1975, 2nd printing), 520-539 ("The Eve of Chalcedon") and 543-550 ("The Dogmatic Formula of Chalcedon") and J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: Black (1950) 1980), 5th printing, 338-343.

¹¹ A. Wessels, *Images of Jesus. How Jesus Is Perceived and Portrayed in Non-European Cultures* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1990), 13-17 ("Portrayal or Betrayal?").

The 'translation' of the gospel into the language of Hellenistic, Greco-Roman culture can lead us to close our eyes to certain aspects of Jesus' significance that perhaps can be discovered only now. At the very least, this is a legitimate question to ask with regard to the councils of the early church. Thus it is that an unimpeachable witness such as Grillmeier, author of a massive, standard work on the continuing importance of the council of Chalcedon, places this question high on his list of questions which every contemporary evaluation of that council must answer.¹²

Criteria for the Assessment of the Contextual Jesus

Reference has often been made to the striking parallels between Jesus and central Greek mythological figures such as Odysseus (his descent to the underworld in order to liberate those who dwelled there), Orpheus (who likewise descended to the realm of the dead, and epitomized the 'good shepherd') and Asclepius (the healer and savior of mankind).¹³ The tendency toward monotheism that some authors claim to identify in the Greek world over the first three centuries of our era makes it plausible to speak of possible mutual influences, although there has not been much incontestable evidence produced of direct dependence.¹⁴ Creative syntheses were apparently not out of the question.

Here we are, of course, immediately confronted by the question of criteria for new, contemporary syntheses. Such criteria cannot be identified without reference to the role of scriptures in a religious community because the content of a holy book always functions as the point of reference for the identity of a religious tradition. That is illustrated by the role of the Bible in the church. Let us pause for a moment to examine this.

The New Testament came into being through a process which lasted several centuries. The early church saw this process as having been guided by the Holy Spirit. The churches of the Reformation have always emphasized that the final canon arose through the inherent authority of the content of the books involved.

¹² Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, 555-557 ("Chalcedon—End or Beginning?").

¹³ A. Wessels, *Europe. Was it Ever Really Christian?* (London: SCM Press, 1994), 17-54 ("The Graeco-Roman Context"); J. Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries. His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, (1985) 1999), 34-45 ("The Light of the Gentiles") and Th. Schmeller, "The Greco-Roman Background of New Testament Christology" in: R.F. Berkey—S.A. Edwards (eds.), *Christology in Dialogue* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1993), 54-65.

¹⁴ R.L. Fox, *Pagans and Christians in the Mediterranean world from the second century AD to the conversion of Constantine* (London: Penguin Books, (1986) 1988), 34-35 and 260-261, and also Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 12-13.

In other words: the texts speak for themselves. People saw the Spirit of God at work in this inherent persuasive power. The Roman Catholic tradition has always underscored the decisions of the church in the canonization process. Here people saw the Spirit of God at work in the ecclesiastical factor.

The two accents do not exclude one another. Thus, in the ecumenical discussions of the second half of the 20th century on the authority of the Bible, there has always been reference to both the inner power of conviction possessed by the texts, and also the synodical decisions of the early church. One might say that the church and the Bible presuppose each other. The reading and expounding church is the institution that passes the Bible—and thus also the ‘remembered Jesus’—down through the centuries.¹⁵

This same Jesus who is the object of tradition is at the same time also the Lord of the church, subject of the tradition, and the true motor of the transmission process. Ultimately, it is He who expounds the scriptures, distributes the sacraments, appoints incumbents, etc. Thus the church is not an autonomous owner of tradition that acts on its own authority, but only the institution that represents Jesus. In its own, always inadequate manner, the church—in its (a) proclamation, (b) administration of the sacraments and (c) conduct that serves as an example—makes Jesus present.

Only when the Jesus to whom the Bible testifies also becomes the criterion for his own transmission can the church and the Bible become closely involved with one another. When the church is seen as an institution that is constantly reformed by Jesus’ message and in its role as exegete, it is then no threat to *sola scriptura*, but is rather the prerequisite for it. In the concrete situation of the proclamation of Jesus’ message in a new cultural situation, the dyad of church and Bible posited here means that the transmission of Jesus’ significance can never be the task of individual believers alone. Individual interpretation will always have to be rooted in the way in which the church through the ages, drawing on the Bible, has understood Jesus’ significance.

¹⁵ In the volume issued by the WCC as result of the reception process of what has been called the Lima text on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (1982), this interconnectedness of Jesus’ message (= the Gospel = the Tradition), the Bible and the church is clearly emphasized. *Baptism, Eucharist & Ministry 1982-1990. Report on the Process and Responses* (Faith and Order Paper No. 149) (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1990), 131-142 (“Scripture and Tradition”), esp. 137: “The ecclesial character of the transmission process: Tradition, Scripture, church, cannot be treated as separate phenomena. There is no Tradition without concrete human traditions, there is no Scripture without a community of believers; there is no church without the God-given Tradition or without the living word of God in the scriptures.” I would have been inclined to write ‘Church’ here in this context, with a capital ‘C,’ as a normative idea to which the churches as human traditions refer.

With this we have arrived at an important criterion for evaluation, which, using a classical term, we would want to designate the criterion of the historical and contemporary catholicity of the church. A part of this is the historical and current Christian witnessing community, within which (a) the exposition and preaching of the Bible has a leading role; (b) the essence of church history (the great conciliar decisions) are seen as directed by God (since church history was not a mistake!), and (c) the assembled community defines the believers around the Christian feasts and principle sacraments at the heart of the tradition. In this formulation the Bible, church history and liturgy form a seedbed and matrix for the meanings which can be ascribed to Jesus.

Thus, the concrete community in which it is read forms an important aspect of the history of the transmission of a holy book. With our theme of the contextual Jesus in mind, that means that the environment of this reading community defines the way in which the Bible is understood to a great extent. Its shared cultural horizon of understanding colors its interpretation of the Bible. The more that cultural differences between the reading communities spread around the world are recognized, the greater the diversity of interpretations becomes. That means that the history of the interpretation of the Bible is far from closed after two thousand years. New points of discussion can still be discovered. These might involve really new aspects whereby no direct traces of which are to be found in scripture, but which the reading communities involved see as an extension—or as implications—of the Christian tradition.¹⁶ The discussion of what role ancestors can play for Christians is an example of such a question.¹⁷

¹⁶ R.S. Sugirtharajah, "Prologue and Perspective" in: Idem (ed.), *Asian Faces of Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), VIII-XII, esp. IX: "Their [Asian, MEB] christological constructions demonstrate that one need not necessarily appeal to precedents or paradigms enshrined in the gospels or in early Christian works, nor have these constructions necessarily based on or legitimated by canonical writings. As new hermeneutical horizons open, new interpretative resources can be creatively employed to unravel the mystery of Jesus. Thus they weave a wide variety of cultural symbols, philosophical insights and social concerns of Asia into their christological articulations. These understandings of Jesus indicate that as fresh horizons open up, the perceptions of Jesus that emerge may not resemble either in form or content portrayals of him depicted in the Christian scriptures."

¹⁷ E. Dovlo, "Ancestors and Soteriology in African and Japanese Religions", *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 3/4 (1993/1994) 48-57; C. Nyamiti, *Christ our Ancestor* (Gweru/Harare/Gokomere: Mambo Press, 1984); B. Bujo, *African Theology in its Social Context* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992), 75-92 ("The Theology of Ancestors as the Starting-Point for a New Christology"); M.R. Mullins, "What about the Ancestors? Some Japanese Christian Responses to Protestant Individualism", *Studies in World Christianity* 4 (1998) 1, 41-64 and Idem, *Christianity Made in Japan. A Study of Indigenous Movements* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), 129-155 ("Japanese Christians and the World of the Dead").

For many Christians, particularly in Asia, this necessity arises from the fact that they belong to a religious minority, and all issues that are felt to be important in the society involved are already religiously 'engaged.' The dominant majority religion generally occupies a central place in social life and leaves its mark on all important facets of life. Religious interpretations are given to birth, marriage and death, and all the views about happiness, suffering, justice, expectations for the future, etc. that lie behind them. One cannot participate in such a culture without, in some form, adopting the central concepts that are current in that culture.¹⁸

There is no more unclaimed religious territory in Africa and Asia today than there was in the land of Canaan in the time that Israel settled there. Christianity will not find any prospective believers there as a *tabula rasa*. On the basis of concrete questions that people encounter in Bible translations into African languages, the African theologian Lamin Sanneh has spoken of the "irony of mission." Missionaries went to foreign lands with the assumption that the people there had never heard of the God of the Bible, but in order to make it clear to them who the God of the Bible is, in their Bible translations they used words which had long existed in those cultures as names of God to designate the God of the Bible.¹⁹ This implicitly acknowledged that God was already in Africa and Asia before the missionaries arrived.²⁰ Thus, also with regard to the name of God, syntheses that arise in the course of an inculturation process always initiate the consequent changes, in the form of shifts in meaning.

¹⁸ P.C. Phan, "Jesus the Christ with an Asian Face", *Theological Studies* 57 (1996) 3, 399-430.

¹⁹ L. Sanneh, *Translating the Message. The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, Orbis, 1989), 157-191, esp. 158: "The central premise of missionary preaching is also a most acute source of irony. Many missionaries assumed that Africans had not heard of God and that it was the task of mission to remedy this defect. In practical terms, however, missionaries started by inquiring among the people what names of concepts for God existed, and having established such fundamental points of contact, they proceeded to adopt local vocabulary to preach the gospel. This field method of adopting the vernacular came to diverge sharply from the ideology of mission". The same holds true for the adoption of the existing name *Hananim* as name of the God of Israel by the Korean Christians. Cf. S.-D. Oak, "Shamanistic Tan'gun and Christian Hananim. Protestant Missionaries' Interpretation of the Korean Founding Myth, 1895-1934", *Studies in World Christianity* 7 (2001) 1, 42-57.

²⁰ C.S. Song, "Do This in Memory of Jesus. The Root of the Reformed Heritage" in: H.S. Wilson (ed.), *Gospel and Cultures. Reformed Perspectives* (Studies of the WARC no. 35) (Geneva: WARC, 1996), 17-36, esp. 24: "This is an admission that Christianity has not entered a spiritual vacuum in the world outside the West. It is a theological acknowledgement that Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, or the Pacific, have never been left alone by God, let alone abandoned by God until the first missionaries set foot in these lands."

Here we encounter one of the most salient characteristics of the process of inculturation. Changes always occur on both sides: in the concept being applied in a different context, and in the new context itself. The concept which has been detached from its original religious context becomes a different concept in a different religious context, since the meaning of a concept is to a great extent determined by the context within which it is used. The new context is then, in turn, also changed by the new concept that is being employed in its midst. For instance, to call Jesus our ancestor *par excellence* changes both the concept of an ancestor as it has been understood until now, and the image of Jesus that has been familiar in the past. Thus a *double transformation* occurs. A creative process takes place that leaves neither side—neither the adopted concept nor its new context—unaffected.

The principle of *double transformation*, as it is being employed here, is emphatically to be distinguished from the “Christ the Transformer of Culture” of which Richard Niebuhr spoke in his famous study *Christ and Culture*. There he expressly had in mind a one-way process, the antithesis to the equally one-way model of the “Christ of Culture.”²¹ In the one case, culture is approached exclusively from Jesus, and, in the other, Jesus exclusively from culture. In neither of the two models is there any real reciprocity. We indeed see this reciprocity emerge in the two-part article by the Indian Jesuit Noel Sheth that appeared in the Indian Roman Catholic periodical *Vidyayoti* under the title “Hindu Avatara and Christian Incarnation: A Comparison.” In his final paragraph, he remarks, “In this encounter of the two traditions there is also the further possibility that when one tradition tries to assimilate elements from the other tradition, these original elements may themselves undergo transformation and acquire new meaning and significance. Perhaps this is the path that future interreligious dialogue between the two traditions may take.”²²

The “Unknown Jesus” of Asia and Africa

In the process of double transformation that we have just discussed, one variant of the observation that God was already in Asia and Africa before the missionaries arrived will constantly play a role. Can it also be said that Jesus was no stranger

²¹ H.R. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper Torch Books, (1951) 1956), 190-229 (“Christ the Transformer of Culture”) and 83-115 (“The Christ of Culture”).

²² N. Sheth, “Hindu Avatara and Christian Incarnation: A Comparison” (I) and (II), *Vidyayoti* 67 (2003), 302.

for Africans and Asians, even before the missionaries came? Did Paul also take that premise as his starting point?²³ In Asia that question has been widely debated for a century now, but in Africa, where—in a certain sense—Christology has been a latecomer, this question has been primarily posed in the last two decades.²⁴

If the question is answered “yes,” the reasoning often runs along theological, historical or anthropological lines, respectively. It is then, for instance, stressed that in the New Testament, Christ—as Logos, as the eternal Word—is also called the creator (John 1:1-4; Eph. 1:20-23 and Col. 1:15-20). Thus the same reasoning that can be employed with regard to the Father can be used for him. Particularly in Asia, where the image of Jesus as Logos—as the cosmic Christ—has been propagated widely, we often find this theological reasoning employed.²⁵

The historical approach generally points to the early proclamation of the gospel in Africa (North Africa and Ethiopia) and in India and China. African and Asian Christians say, in so many words, that when—in the 15th and 16th century, and later in the 19th century—the missionaries arrived to preach Christ, we had already heard of him a thousand years before.²⁶

We encounter the anthropological approach in its most pronounced form in the Indian theologian Panikkar, but it can also be recognized in the Japanese theologians Takizawa and Yagi. For Panikkar every living creature is a manifestation of the “christic principle” and thus embodies a “christophany.” For him Christ is the symbol of the mediation between the relative (the human) and the absolute (the divine), a dyad that characterizes every religion.²⁷ Thus Christ

²³ Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries*, 45: “As Paul, the apostle of Jesus Christ, had said to the Greeks about the ‘Unknown God’, so the successors of Paul went on to say to the Greeks and all the Gentiles about the ‘Unknown Jesus’: ‘What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.’” Pelikan refers here to Acts 17:23 and Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 5.12.

²⁴ J. Mbiti, “Is Jesus Christ in African Religion?” in: J.S. Pobee (ed.), *Exploring Afro-Christology* (Studies in the Intercultural History of Christianity 79) (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1992) and J.M. Bahemuka, “The Hidden Christ in African traditional Religion” in: J.N.K. Mugambi—L. Magesa (eds.), *Jesus in African Christianity. Experimentation and Diversity in African Christology* (Nairobi: Initiaves, Ltd., 1989), 1-16.

²⁵ S.J. Samartha, *One Christ, Many Religions. Towards a Revised Christology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991).

²⁶ K. Bediako, *Theology and Identity. The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992).

²⁷ R. Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism. Towards an Ecumenical Christophany* (Maryknoll: Orbis, (1964) 1981). Cf. also K. Takizawa, *Das Heil im Heute. Texte einer japanischen Theologie* (Theologie der Ökumene 21) (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987) and S. Yagi, “Christ and Buddha” in: Sugirtharajah, *Asian Faces of Jesus*, 25-45.

becomes a “principle” that characterizes every person. The specific meaning of the historical Jesus is pushed, very emphatically, into the background.

We can also note discussion about Jesus as “crucified people,” as we find that in both Asiatic and African theology as a variant of the anthropological approach. Jesus is then primarily suffering mankind. Here the historical Jesus certainly does not disappear from the scene, but all sorts of questions arise with regard to what, if anything, was unique about *Jesus’* cross.²⁸

As the Philippine theologian Virginia Fabella suggests, an affirmative answer to the question about Jesus’ presence in Asia and Africa becomes most exciting when as much as possible of the historical Jesus can be included in the Asian cosmic Christ and the African Jesus as healer and ancestor.²⁹ After all, without the historical Jesus and without the acknowledgement (or recognition) of the core of his message in the preaching and celebration of the sacraments in the concrete community of faith called the church—not the Western,—but equally not the African or Asian—Jesus is conceivable.

²⁸ C.S. Song, *Jesus, the Crucified People* (New York: Augsburg Fortress, (1990) 1996) and Y. Tesfai (ed.), *The Scandal of a Crucified World. Perspectives on the Cross and Suffering* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994).

²⁹ V. Fabella, “Christology and Popular Religions,” *Voices of the Third World* 8 (1995) 2, 22-37, esp. 32: “Should we not join the Jesus of history and the cosmic Christ in a rich pneumatic Christology (...)?”.